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## THE MUSICAL TIMES,

And Singing Class Circular.

DECEMBER 1, 1868.

## DESCRIPTIVE MUSIC.

By HENRY C. LUNN.

ONE of the many good pieces of satire in Sheridan's *Critic*, is where Lord Burleigh gravely comes forward to the front of the stage, shakes his head, and then walks off, without uttering a word. "Now, pray," (says Sneer), "what did he mean by that?" "Why, by that shake of the head," replies Puff, "he gave you to understand that even tho' they had more justice in their cause and wisdom in their measures, yet, if there was not a greater spirit shown on the part of the people, the country would at last fall a sacrifice to the hostile ambition of the Spanish monarchy." "The devil!" says Sneer, "did he mean all that by shaking his head?" "Every word of it," replies Puff, "if he shook his head as I taught him." Now, this is doubtless very amusing; and we laugh at it accordingly; but does it ever occur to those who are in the habit of talking, thinking, and writing about music, how thoroughly this absurdity is constantly acted upon with regard to the works of our modern composers? Do we not continually find that a deeply philosophical intention is attributed to a writer by those who fancy that they alone possess the power of diving into his real meaning; and that, consequently, an unpretentious work is thus often absurdly elevated beyond its legitimate place as a musical composition? If it were doubted that it is the fashion of the day to enlarge upon the inner meaning of a modern German work, for instance, we have only to turn to the laudatory synopsis placed in the hands of the audience whenever it is performed, every word of which the hearer is supposed to endorse, or to confess, with a penitential look, that he is utterly unable to appreciate it. The influence thus exercised upon criticism is, of course, sufficiently apparent; for as those who have studied deeply a work, unhesitatingly tell the public what the composer thought and meant when he wrote it, no mere tyro in the art could afford to speak of it in a less elevated strain; and thus we are perpetually called upon to believe that a mental problem is clearly worked out in a Sonata, and a profound system of philosophy developed in a Symphony. That it is the mission of music to awaken a train of ideas in the mind of an auditor is universally admitted; but that these ideas should be the same with all is a manifest absurdity. A composer may have a real intention underlying every passage in his work; but he would rarely be satisfied with the interpretation of these passages, even by the most intellectual thinkers, because it would be utterly impossible for them to do more than hazard a series of guesses on the subject—the hearers being compelled to translate music into words, whilst the composer translates words into music. "Many persons," writes Mendelssohn, in one of his letters, "consider *Melusina* to be my best overture; at all events, it is the most deeply felt; but as to the fabulous nonsense of the musical papers about red coral and green sea monsters, and magic palaces and deep seas, this is stupid stuff, and fills me with amazement."

This "stupid stuff," however, continues to be

written; and, indeed, so numerous are these criticisms, that the mental process necessary to comprehend the meaning of a composer appears to spring up spontaneously in corners where we should least expect it to exist. Take, for instance, the following notice upon one of Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques*: "A gradual ascent from a level country, through various elevated regions, to a culminating summit, composed of stupendous rocks of terrific aspect and difficulty, amid which the presiding genius is one of awe and fear, and where the pole-star of the beautiful begins to pale in the dark obscure, while grace and loveliness have been left far below. This image may symbolize that tremendous study. And if a few tortured spirits be introduced to people the wilds, it might help out the representation. And yet at the end of it came an undoubtedly fine burst, as if the whole scene were momentarily brightened by fresh beams from that pole-star which one thought had been lost to view."

"Amazing, indeed," says some musical Sneer, "did he mean all that in a pianoforte study?" "Every word of it," replies the critical Puff, "if the performer had played it as I taught him."

We can readily believe that were essays like these upon the philosophical meaning of every composition to become a recognised necessity, the effect would be not only that those works which are incapable of such analysis must inevitably be laid aside as unworthy of the advanced intellect of the age, but that musical pieces written to illustrate a metaphysical chain of thought, would be seized upon in preference to those in which mere melodious beauty, symmetry of proportion, and variety of character form the chief attractions. Before we proceed, however, to express any opinion upon the possibility of such a result, let us endeavour to discover how far this mode of criticising musical compositions has already spread.

The great instrumental works of Beethoven and Mendelssohn are so constantly before us in the present day, that we may safely accept them as a test of the manner in which compositions of such pretension are received and commented upon. Were it possible for us to reproduce one half of the inflated nonsense that has been written and said about Beethoven's Sonatas, we might fill a moderately-sized volume. "How exquisite," we are told, "is the dreamy beauty of the 'Moonlight Sonata.' Do we not almost seem to see the silvery moonbeams over the grass; and, by the pale light, appear to wander over the well-known meadows, pausing at intervals, as some thought of the past recalls us from the contemplation of the lovely scene to the dull realities of the world?" Very pretty, no doubt, is all this maudlin poetry; but, unfortunately for the writer of it, Beethoven never called it the "Moonlight Sonata" at all; and probably had no more idea of moonlight when he composed it, than he had in any other of the works which he has bequeathed to the world. Again, in the Sonata in D (usually called the "Sonata Pastorale"), there can be little doubt of the pastoral character of the composition; but the title, "Sonata Pastorale," was never given to it by Beethoven. In some of the greatest Symphonies of the same composer, are we not told that the aim of Beethoven has not been so much to write a great musical work, which shall live and be remembered for its artistic beauty and excellence, as to depict, by the aid of sound, a definite philosophical idea, in which the auditors shall be carried forward, by the genius of the writer, into the

profound speculations of metaphysical enquiry. One movement is to express the "yearning of the soul after the infinite;" in another, the composer returns to the material world, and rests awhile from his more serious mental labours; in a third, we resume, with renewed power, the original idea; and the restlessness of human aspirations is again displayed, until the final chords bring the critical analyst into a state of perplexity as to the exact conclusion the composer may have arrived at. But Mendelssohn—the man, above all others, who would have been most startled and shocked at any such attempts to impute motives and feelings to him which he never possessed—has, perhaps, been as much subjected to these criticisms as any other composer. Can anybody, for instance, say why the *Andante* in his "Italian Symphony" is called the "Pilgrims' March"? In the first place, who originally decided that it is a march at all? And even allowing that it is a march, what, in the name of wonder, have pilgrims to do with it? It is certainly one of the most beautiful *andantes* in the whole of the composer's works; but, strangely enough, it was written in the brilliant city of Naples, the very place where it might be imagined he would have been inspired with the gayest and liveliest portions of the Symphony. How often, too, do we read the most extraordinary synopsis of one of his overtures, almost bar by bar, as if the enthusiastic critic had been admitted into Mendelssohn's confidence when he wrote it, and had been furnished by him with a private pass-key to his innermost thoughts. In the "Hebrides" (one of the most beautifully imaginative of these compositions, if left to tell its own tale), we are informed that "sounding shells" are to be heard; and that, even where sounds are not imitated, it will be necessary to translate each portion of the work into a definite idea if we wish thoroughly to enjoy the composition. But, curiously enough, his *Lieder ohne worte* (those exquisitely suggestive sketches which he has, as a rule, purposely left without a title), have perhaps been more decisively christened than any other pieces we could mention; indeed, if we remember rightly, an edition of them was once published with a name affixed to each composition in the volume; and we know that words have been put to these songs *without* words, thus, indeed, painting the lily with a rough daub which must materially shock the sensitive nature of any person innately endowed with a perception of natural beauty. Whilst on this subject, we cannot refrain from quoting from a preface to these pieces, by Mr. J. W. Davison. Speaking of two of the songs, he says: "What were the ideas of the author while composing either must remain a mystery; but it is reasonable to suppose that the one was produced in a very cheerful, the other in an equally depressed, state of mind. They are both, however, so eminently beautiful as 'absolute music,' without reference to poetical illustration, that it is wholly unnecessary, as, in this instance, it would be presumptuous, to invent titles for them." And yet, in spite of this wholesome protest, so constantly is one called a "Hunting Song," another the "Spinner-lyed," and a third the "Bee's Wedding," that few persons know whether these titles were really given by Mendelssohn himself, or invented by a music-publisher. Truly, indeed, may this sensitive composer speak of the "stupid stuff" written upon his works; but if he were keenly alive to this during his lifetime, how much more would he be filled "with amazement" could he but know what has been said since his death.

It must be understood that we have hitherto confined our remarks to music that is simply suggestive: imitative music will, of course, call up the same feelings in the minds of all; and is, *therefore*, as we believe, belonging to a much lower department of art. In truth, whenever reality obtrudes itself where realistic ideas are not sought for, it immediately depresses the art it is intended to raise. An exquisite statue in white marble, for instance, is fitted for the most artistic gallery of sculpture; but colour it, in imitation of flesh, or drape it, however lightly, with real garments, and it becomes suited only for Madame Tussaud's Exhibition of Wax-work. Thus, when real sounds are introduced into music, the art which should suggest is degraded to imitate; and the most beautiful poetry instantly sinks into the most common-place prose. We shall, of course, be reminded that Handel and Haydn have often had recourse to these devices to heighten the effect of their music; and that even Beethoven, in his "Pastoral Symphony," has introduced the sounds of the cuckoo and the nightingale; but we cannot allow these few instances to shake our conviction of the truth of the theory we have advanced. Most assuredly neither Handel nor Haydn have done more than vulgarise their music by venturing beyond the legitimate province of an art which they have done so much to elevate; and, exquisitely as Beethoven has written the passage to which we have alluded, we should have infinitely preferred the "Pastoral Symphony" without it, because the suggestive character of the work (which all must feel to be its great beauty) would then be in perfect keeping throughout. Were we to seek for an illustration of this principle, we could not mention one more to our purpose than the performance of this very composition at the Promenade Concerts of the late M. Jullien. In the storm movement, the house was darkened, and theatrical thunder and lightning were introduced, to aid the intention of the composer. This was received with thunders of applause; whilst, at the same concerts, Mendelssohn's purely suggestive overture to the "Midsummer Night's Dream," was most unceremoniously hissed. That the effect of these two works upon a mixed audience, played in precisely the same manner, would now probably be exactly reversed, is a proof that those who can derive enjoyment from such compositions at all, have educated themselves to the belief that descriptive instrumental music, whether bad or good, can never be improved by effects borrowed from an art with which it must, of necessity, be antagonistic.

Believing, therefore, as we do, that the true mission of music is to suggest, we regret to see the growing tendency to analyse a composition beyond what we conceive to be the intention of the composer in his original conception of the work. As we have already said, such criticism may lead to the utter destruction of melody, beauty, and form; and eventually we may be taught to believe that unless musical works can be translated into words, they cannot be received as the highest productions of the art. Upon this subject, Mendelssohn speaks so eloquently, in one of his letters, that we cannot resist quoting the passage. "There is so much talk about music," he says, "and yet so little really said. For my part, I believe that words do not suffice for such a purpose, and if I found they did suffice, then I certainly would have nothing more to do with music. People often complain that music is ambiguous; that their ideas on the subject always seem so vague,

whereas every one understands words. With me it is exactly the reverse; not merely with regard to entire sentences, but also as to individual words. These, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible, when compared with genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. What the music I love expresses to me is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but, on the contrary, too *definite*." Having been asked, by Herr Souchay, the meanings of some of his "Songs without words," he replies: "If you ask me what *my* idea is, I say, just the song as it stands; and if I have, in my mind, a definite term or terms with regard to one or more of these songs, I will disclose them to no one, because the words of one person assume a totally different meaning in the mind of another person, because the music of the song alone can awaken the same ideas and the same feelings in one mind as in another,—a feeling which is not, however, expressed by the same words."

That Mendelssohn thoroughly felt music as a language which spoke to him more eloquently than words, we can readily imagine; but we can, perhaps, scarcely go so far as to think that this would be the case with the majority even of intelligent listeners. The very beauty of music is, however, in our opinion, that it should speak for itself, however indefinitely; and any attempt, therefore, to tell us more than the composer has written down, must be considered an impertinence. Where a subject has been musically treated throughout a great work, and it has been intended by the composer that the audience shall be made aware of this fact before listening to it, a title has been given; and we are then justified in endeavouring to determine with what success this idea has been worked out. But when, in spite of no such intimation having been conveyed by the composer to his audience, we read an elaborate essay upon the philosophical meaning of every phrase in the composition, the very natural question of Sneer, in the *Critic*, will force itself upon us; and we begin to feel that, were the composer living, he would, like Mendelssohn, be shocked at the "fabulous nonsense" written upon his work, and be filled "with amazement," if not with indignation.

### ROYAL ITALIAN OPERA.

THE Autumn series of opera at this establishment has been highly successful. Miss Minnie Hauck has gradually made her way with the public; and proved in the trying part of *Margarita*, in Gounod's *Faust*, that she wants but age and experience to realise the character to perfection. Madlle. Ilma de Murska has also appeared in the parts already well-known to her admirers; and has achieved a triumph in *Dinorah*; in our opinion by far her best assumption. The season, according to present announcement, will have closed before our number appears.

### CRYSTAL PALACE.

ON the 14th ult., another of the disinterred compositions of the prolific Schubert was given for the first time at the Saturday Concerts here—*The Song of Miriam*; a soprano solo and chorus, the words translated, and partly re-written from the German of Grillparzer, by William Duthie. It is scarcely, perhaps, to be expected that any composer who had set himself the task of composing this subject, should be able to steer clear of reminiscences, if not of plagiarisms, from Handel; but in this case we can conscientiously affirm that only in a few instances has Schubert had his great predecessor in his mind; and that seldom in parts where we should most expect it; for instance, in the

passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea, where the treatment of the theme is thoroughly original. The first *Allegro*, in C major, "Strike the cymbals," is certainly very much like Handel; but the next movement, a flowing melody in ♯ rhythm, is an exquisite solo for soprano and chorus, which would be extremely beautiful, even apart from the work. An *Allegro Agitato* leads to a grand descriptive movement, preceded by a wonderfully suggestive short piece, in which the coming storm is announced. The movement illustrative of the overthrow of Pharaoh and his host is unequal in merit; but in some parts it rises almost to sublimity, especially where the horse and his rider are described as madly struggling with the rush of waters. After this comes a placid theme, in E minor, which is afterwards given to the chorus; then follows a two-part choral canon; and the Cantata is nobly concluded by a repetition of the opening chorus, and a well wrought fugue. The soprano solo was excellently given by Madame Lemmens-Sherrington, and the work was listened to by a large and thoroughly appreciative audience. The Cantata has just been published by Messrs. Novello, Ewer and Co.

### MONDAY POPULAR CONCERTS.

THE first performance for the present season took place at St. James's Hall on the 16th ult. No novelty of any kind was produced; but the programme was in every respect an excellent one, and included the ever-welcome Clarionet Quintet, of Mozart. The pianist was Herr Pauer; and the vocalist Miss Edith Wynne, who is rapidly advancing to the first rank as a Concert singer. We understand that Mr. John Francis Barnett, the pianist, is engaged to perform during the present month.

### SACRED HARMONIC SOCIETY.

THE thirty-seventh season of this Society commenced on the 20th ult., with a performance of Costa's *Naaman*, Madame Lemmens-Sherrington singing the soprano part with much effect; the other principal vocalists being Madame Sainton-Dolby, Mr. G. Perren, and Mr. Santley. Mr. Costa, as usual, conducted. The Crown Prince and Princess of Prussia were present. We are glad to find that Beethoven's Mass in D will form one of the attractions during the season.

### GENOA.

THE Teatro Doria is this year giving a series of Operatic performances that bid fair to surpass those at the Opera House, Teatro Carlo Felice; which has latterly shown a lamentable want of judgment in its selection of entertainments and of artists to perform them. Whereas, at the Teatro Doria all is conducted with taste and spirit. Gounod's immortal *Faust* was chosen for the commencing opera; and Flotow's charming *Marta* is to follow. Signor Perotti is a tenor singer of rare merit; and acquitted himself in the arduous part of *Faust* with an excellence that won him hearty applause, and ever-increasing favour with the Genoese, who are an extremely difficult audience to lure into any demonstration of approval, still less of enthusiasm. Not only has Signor Perotti a fine voice, but he has good school in his singing; and reserves his loud notes for passages dramatically and properly demanding energy. He is not one of those indiscriminate bawlers who revolt musical taste by bellowing forth the strongest notes in their voice upon every occasion, appropriate or inappropriate; and it is positively a novel delight to meet with a vocalist who refrains from this senseless means of gaining the ears and hands of "the groundlings." Besides this merit in his singing, Signor Perotti is a finished actor: he makes love with tenderness and refinement; he has the air and demeanour of a gentleman and scholar; his by-play is judicious,—showing that he is thinking of the character and situation he has to fulfil; and the action of his hands—a main point in an accomplished